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## **Refusing the Child: Weininger, Edelman, Kertész**

Caitríona Ní Dhúill

Wer uns nicht fruchtbar macht, wird uns gleichgültig.

(Whoever does not make us fruitful becomes irrelevant to us.)

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente* 1883-84

“No” – It should never happen to another child, what happened to me: my childhood.

Imre Kertész, *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*

The future as the reproduction of an eternally same present – through the engendering of bodies that are positionable in a stable and legible matrix of sex and gender – is the straight line which the queer precisely seeks to queer, to think against. The aim of this article is to examine some of the implications that different models of future and futurity have for an understanding of the sexual, and particularly of sexual reproduction, as a realm of future-making practice; and, conversely, to ask how a rethinking of the sexual effects a re-conceptualisation of the future. The relationships between sex and futurity find a limit case in anti-natalism, in which the future horizon offered by human sexual reproduction is fundamentally refused: no children, no future. Three very different sources will be explored here with a view to demonstrating the complexity, and incommensurability, of various refusals of the child: the idealist anti-natalism of Otto Weininger’s *Sex and Character* (1903); the queer refusal of reproductive futurism in Lee Edelman’s *No Future* (2004); and – in many ways more troubling and ultimately more compelling than either of these, because forged in

the crucible of historical catastrophe – the negation of the thinkability of fatherhood through the experience of Auschwitz in Imre Kertész's *Kaddish for a Child Not Born* (1990, English translation 1997).

For the straight reproductive future of successive generations which is the target of Lee Edelman's anti-futurist critique, the child in the family represents the key to human fulfilment. Yet regardless of whether the family's value, or 'family values', are endorsed, put into question, or refused – regardless of whether the figure of the child calls forth desire, affirmation, disengagement, or alienation – it is obvious that human reproduction is central to how we think the future. So obvious, in fact, that it is difficult to articulate the relationship between these two categories, child and future, without falling into the sorts of banalities according to which children 'bespeak', 'promise', 'point to', or even somehow already 'inhabit' and 'embody' the future – precisely the sorts of habitual, near-universal pieties which Edelman's text sets out to expose and call into question.

In Kertész's *Kaddish for a Child Not Born* (which will be discussed in more detail below), the opening conversation between the narrator and one Dr. Oblath gives us a lightly defamiliarised way into the familiar problem. Oblath, like the narrator, is 'getting on in years':

and consequently some possibilities, such as the potential of having a child, gradually dissipate for him, become impossibilities (Kertész 1997: 6).

The conventional cultural constructions of childlessness and by extension of parenthood which Oblath goes on to rehearse are worth quoting in full, as they provide the foil against which the narrator's much less conventional, because traumatically alienated relationship to

these issues is thrown into sharp relief:

he said that by saying that he feels a loss, because of what happened, or rather because of what didn't happen, he wasn't thinking of the concept of continuity, this rather abstract, yet, let's admit it, fundamentally satisfying reassurance, derived from knowing that one has (or, rather, has not) fulfilled one's personal and suprapersonal responsibility on earth that is beyond the continuation of existence, his contrived survival in the generations of his offspring, his immortality which beyond mere continuation is man's so-called transcendental – although also very practical – obligation vis-à-vis life, preventing him from feeling truncated, superfluous, and, in the final analysis, impotent. He is not thinking of the frightening prospect of lonely, supportless old age, he said, no, he is in truth afraid of something else, of “emotional atrophying”, said Dr. Oblath, precisely in those terms, as he started down the path anew toward the resort building, supposedly, but in fact now I realize, toward emotional atrophying (7).

Continuity, responsibility, survival, satisfaction, immortality, transcendence, potency – by name-checking these staples of reproductive logic, even if only in order to disavow them, Oblath sets the scene for the narrator's lengthier and more torturous account of how he himself has arrived at his own childlessness. What we gradually realise over the course of the novella's ninety-page gloss on its own opening “No” is that none of Oblath's markers of childlessness – truncated, superfluous, impotent, lonely, supportless, emotionally atrophied – quite captures the radicalism of the narrator's refusal. In the narrator's case, it is not childlessness that ‘begets’ a particular subjective condition (such as loneliness or emotional atrophy); it is rather the post-catastrophic (dis)location of the traumatised subject that ‘begets’ childlessness (the metaphors of fecundity are almost impossible to avoid in any discussion of

this kind). The shift in the final lines of the above-quoted passage from the spatial (the two figures, having been out for a walk, are returning to their accommodation at a writers' retreat) to the affective (the projection of the condition of emotional atrophy that lies in store for the childless Oblath) carries a touch of Kertész's bleak humour, and alerts us to the possibility that the future, as a destination towards which one inevitably progresses, may become a scene of affective desolation. This possibility is realised in the starkest terms at the end of the novella. Auschwitz marks the inauguration of a catastrophic temporality – "after the great shipwreck where *everything has broken*" (31, emphasis in original) – a time within which human acts that reach out into the future or seek to shape it – whether these acts are creative or procreative – become, at least as far as the narrator is concerned, unthinkable and unperformable. What remains is a marriage ended, a child not born, and a writing that binds its writer not to the future reader, nor to the text that will outlive him, but to his own grave. We will return to Kertész's childless narrator in due course.

### **The Future as Child**

If the relationship of reproduction to the future, approached as a question of how children embody futurity, proves difficult to articulate meaningfully because all too obvious (and, in popular discourse, all too affirmative: children 'are' the future, or, as the song says, are 'our future'), perhaps the problem is more usefully approached from another direction – through the question of how the future itself is figured as a birthable, raisable child. Emerging through the ongoing instantiation of present potentialities, the future is that with which the present is pregnant and brought to birth. The metaphor (if metaphor it is) allows for a number of different emphases within, and characterisations of, this process of emergence. 'Birth' envisages the violence and convulsion of the future's advent, its rupture of the present; 'gestation', by contrast, allows the gradual fulfilment of a destiny to come into view; while

‘conception’ brings attention to the ways in which the future arises as the outcome of a prior act or conjunction. That we are dealing with a metaphor here is far from certain; surely our ‘conception’ of the future is inevitably bound up with the terms of our own fundamental generatedness and generativity.

And yet the attempt to wrest the image of the future from the grasp of the reproductive has been made many times, for example through the figuration of futurity in the mode of catastrophe, not as the offspring of a generative present, but as an ungovernable realm which, with Benjamin’s angel, we enter backwards and which grants us nothing more than an expanded view of history’s accumulating wreckage (Benjamin 2003: 392; see also Rabaté in this volume). Here, the man (present) is no longer father (generator) of the child (future), nor the child (present) father (generator) of the man (future) (see Wordsworth 1969 [1807]: 62; for a commentary on this figure and the complexities of biographical causality and temporality it suggests, see Ní Dhúill 2009: 209; compare Edelman 2004: 10). In the catastrophic, negated future elaborated by Kertész, the line of generative continuity is ruptured, and the relation between child and man no longer mediated through the figure of the father, whose position has become impossible to occupy (Eluned Summers-Bremner has suggested that the text’s designation as a ‘kaddish’ or mourning prayer also enacts a reversal of the generational order (2005: 230)). Thus unbound from the logic of reproduction and succession of generations, the future becomes the radically other which, in Levinas’s formulation, “befalls us and lays hold of us” (cited in Rolland 2000: 229). Figures of the future that eschew the temporality of reproduction suggest a future not born of or through violence but one that is itself violent, rushing up to meet us, or plunging, in Joyce’s phrase, through the now and here into the past (Joyce 1960: 238). Yet as the (homo)phallic tenor of these images suggests, even in those figures of futurity that dispense with the generative imagery of conception, pregnancy, or birth, there seems to be no easy escape from sex. It may

be that the future can be thought apart from reproductive sex, but not apart from sex altogether.

In what follows, I attempt to tease out the tensions and connections between figurations of the future that either call on or repudiate reproductive sex, and to account for the eloquence of non-reproductive sexuality in this context. This will proceed through a discussion of, first, Lee Edelman's anti-futurism and its possible modernist antecedents, including the anti-reproductive stance of Otto Weininger (1880-1903), with due attention, of course, to the many and obvious differences between them. The examination of hitherto unacknowledged affinities between Weininger and Edelman draws on one of the twentieth century's foremost philosophers of futurity, the German Marxist-messianist thinker Ernst Bloch (1885-1977). Bloch's philosophy, while it embraces generativity, including sexual generativity, for its potential to figure the future, by no means accords primacy to the reproductive or gestational. While the Blochian future is hidden in the womb of history, unfolding from the 'darkness of the lived moment', the main characters of his philosophy are not the progenitors of that future, but rather the midwives who are to deliver it – an echo, to be sure, of Marx's midwife, revolutionary force, but elaborated into a model of future-oriented praxis that exceeds the original political context of Bloch's thought and outlives the demise of that context. The discussion concludes by returning to the child not born, the addressee of Kertész's *Kaddish*, and attempting to establish his or her temporal location. In doing so, it points to possibilities for further dialogue between the critical stances of anti-reproductive anti-futurism – whether in the asceticist, queer or catastrophic mode – and Bloch's philosophy of militant hope.

### **No future for Edelman**

In his *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman offers a critical perspective on the knotted relationship between futurity, fantasy, desire, and reproduction. The object of his polemic is reproductive futurism, the “ideology of reproductive necessity” (2004: 121) which is “propelled by desire, guaranteed by the phallus, figured by the Child” (2004: 100). *No Future* mobilises the queer as that which resists subsumption or co-optation into this monopolising project: against the reproduction of reality into the future, it places the figure of “reality’s abortion” (2004: 7). Edelman offers a compelling account of the question of the future as a question of sex, or at least of a certain type of sex. In this he rewrites, from a queer angle, the fantasy of refusal that has animated various counter-cultural attempts to rattle the cage of reproductive futurism, be these asceticist, misogynist, auto-destructive or otherwise. Earlier examples would include Weininger’s striking injunctions in *Sex and Character* of 1903, which take misogyny all the way through to its logical conclusion, a wholesale invalidation of human reproduction in its current form (we return to Weininger below); or Tristan Tzara’s Dadaist proclamation of 1918, which embraces “every product of disgust capable of becoming a negation of the family” (Tzara 1977: 13); or the gesture of female suicide in the bestselling, anonymously published fictional diary *Eine für Viele (One for Many)* (1902) which is – as Melanie Adley shows elsewhere in this volume – at least in part a refusal of the maternal reproductive role. The longer traditions of ascetic chastity and monasticism which, even where they are not explicitly acknowledged, undoubtedly inform these positions, fall outside the scope of the present discussion, in part because their non-secularism renders their relationship to the modern and modernist futurities at issue here more complex than a brief account would be able to do justice to. That said, Weininger’s *Sex and Character* makes frequent reference to various forms of heroic and monastic asceticism as a central plank of the individual-masculinist characterology he elaborates with a view to emancipation from the blind collective imperative of sexual reproduction; as we shall see, he



draws on St Augustine at a crucial point in his formulation of what we might, today, call a ‘post-human future’.

We could characterise these various modernist takes on non-reproductive asceticism as a kind of anti-futurist refusalism, whereby the well-worn pacifist motto “imagine there’s a war on and no-one’s turned up” (attributed in another form to Carl Sandburg) is taken up and writ large: imagine it’s the future, and no-one’s turned up. The significance of such refusalism lies not so much in its provocative opting out of a cultural mainstream in which the future is “assured by, so as to assure, the continuity of sexed reproduction” (Edelman 2004: 74), as in its exposure of the high price reproductive futurism exacts from the sexed and gendered subjects of the present.

### **No issue for Weininger**

The willed condition of childlessness constitutes a refusal of the future, or at least of the future as embodied by the child; and, for Weininger, childlessness, through chastity, must be the inevitable consequence of ethical insight into the true nature of the sexual act. “There is only platonic love”, writes Weininger, “for everything else called love belongs to the realm of the swine” (1980: 318; Löb’s translation “Whatever else is called love is smut” (2005: 214), misses the animal imagery that is, I believe, highly pertinent Weininger’s self-appointed task of heralding a future in which the animal body of the human has been fully transcended through the refusal of reproduction). The reception and interpretation of Weininger’s notorious text has tended to focus, understandably, on its misogyny and anti-Semitism; also its Kantian idealism; its idiosyncratic and seemingly progressive theory of universal bisexuality and sexual intermediacy; and, in one strand of reception, its remarkable achievement, as the uneven but nevertheless astoundingly erudite product of a precocious and

troubled twenty-three-year-old mind. Of all these themes, it is the misogyny that has tended to command the lion's share of attention in discussions of Weininger's significance and legacy (Steuer 2005; Žižek 2005; Sengoopta 2000; Greenway 1998; Harrowitz and Hyams 1995; Le Rider and Leser 1984). Indeed, the reception history of *Sex and Character* could be justifiably described as a case of the first key term of the book's title eclipsing the second, an imbalance that can only be addressed by going beyond the justified indignation of a feminist reading (I return below to the unlikely possibility of a feminist future for Weininger). The aesthetic-ethical tasks of the Weiningerian subject constitute an orientation towards the future that is qualitatively different from the socially sanctioned generativity of the heteroreproductive family, an orientation echoed, perhaps, in our own day, by the 'ascetologies' elaborated by Peter Sloterdijk (2009) – divested, however, in Sloterdijk's case (at least for the most part), of the misogyny that characterises Weininger's text.

What has received less attention in the literature on Weininger to date is the fact that *Sex and Character* effectively calls for voluntary extinction of the human species by means of sexual abstinence. While it may take several hundred pages to arrive at its final message, building up to it through extended discussions of the ethical implications of woman's nullity and objectification, the conclusion, when it comes, is clear enough, and furthermore notable for the relative lightness of touch with which it is delivered (Weininger's prose has been, up to this point, fairly laborious).

When St. Augustine demanded chastity from all human beings, he was told that humankind would then soon disappear from the face of the earth. This strange fear, which seems to suggest that the most horrifying thing would be the extinction of the *species*, not only reveals an extreme lack of belief in *individual* immortality and in the eternal life of the moral individual [...]: it is also a sign of faint-heartedness and of the

inability to live outside the *herd*. Those who think that way cannot imagine the earth without the teeming mass of human beings [*das Gekribbel und Gewimmel der Menschen*] on it, and they are frightened *not so much of death as of solitude*. If the moral personality within them, which is in itself immortal, had enough strength, they [...] would not fear the death of the body and they would not resort to the certainty of the continuation of the species as a paltry surrogate for their lack of belief in eternal life. The negation of sexuality kills only the physical human being, and that in order to give a full existence to the spiritual (2005: 311).

In a striking reversal of conventional reproductive logic, the child is figured here as a ‘paltry surrogate’ for the more ‘real’ future of individual immortality. Weininger is not calling for full extinction of humanity as he understands it; his conviction that transcendence of the physical through the refusal of sex will allow ‘full existence’ to the immortal moral personality entails not so much the negation of the human future as its ‘spiritualisation’. The path that Weininger charts for humanity’s progression to a higher stage is the path of disembodiment, proceeding through the negation of the woman (*das Weib*) and the refusal of the child. “A woman who had really renounced, a woman who sought peace in herself, would no longer be a woman” (2005: 313). Weininger leaves us to imagine – or to try, or fail, to imagine – the earth without the “teeming mass of human beings on it”: eternal life, it would seem, neither teems nor seethes.

### **Beyond reproduction**

The structures of human reproduction, their articulation in the practice of gender, and the experience of the desiring gendered subject within the heteroreproductive matrix together form a complex of interlocking generative forces that are both oriented towards and

productive of the future, or at least of the future of the human species. (The implications of this anthropocentric concept of futurity for the vanishing futures of other species fall outside the scope of the present discussion; their urgency is beginning to be recognised in the various turns to the animal, the creaturely, and to questions of interspecies relations in recent theoretical work such as that of Giorgio Agamben, Eric Santner, and, in quite a different vein, Donna Haraway.) Weininger's scarcely imaginable future dispenses with all of the above-mentioned future-generating forces, inaugurating an epoch of eternal disembodied subjectivity; small wonder, perhaps, that this dimension of his argument has received scant attention, and that critics and historians of the Viennese *fin de siècle* have tended to focus instead on the more productive – discursively generative? – questions of anti-feminism, genius, and the problematics of Jewish self-hatred. While the bodiless earth of Weininger's concluding scenario may resonate with later apocalyptic dystopias or with some of the antinatalist extremes of contemporary deep ecology and the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement, it has had less purchase on its future readers than his plea for legislative tolerance of homosexuality, his theory of bisexuality, and his exploration of sexually intermediate types. As Judy Greenway puts it, Weininger's theory of 'M' and 'W' "allows the scope to enunciate individual variability and to elude the crude classifications of the sexologists, as well as providing an adaptable way of thinking through personal experience of gender dissonance" (1998: 38). It is this that accounts for Weininger's appeal to sexual radicals of his own time such as Edward Carpenter, as well as for the interest he continues to arouse among gender and queer theorists a century later. It would be rash to attempt to establish any kind of continuity between Weininger's ideas and the various positions accommodated within queer theory since the 1990s – not least because Weininger's work is too riven with contradiction and confusion to allow for such an attempt. Yet insofar as the present discussion concerns the refusal of the human future as figured by the child, it is worth at least considering what common ground might unite very different thinkers and positions around this very refusal.

## Desirable Futures, Undesired Presents

“The future assured by, so as to assure, the continuity of sexed reproduction establishes the horizon of fantasy within which the subject aspires to the meaning that is always, like the object of desire, out of reach” (Edelman 2004: 74). This quotation from Edelman’s book offers a taste of his queer post-Lacanian critique of ‘heteroreproductive futurism’, as he terms it. The futurism with which Edelman’s polemic takes issue has its gaze fixed on an ever-receding horizon of ungraspable meaning and unfulfillable desire: “desire for no object but only, instead, for its own prolongation, for the future itself as a libidinal object procured by its constant lack” (2004: 86). The figure of the child – writ large in *No Future* as “the Child” – is mobilised to cover this lack – the lack that “launches the living being into the empty arms of futurity” (2004: 108) (although the extent to which futurity’s arms are really ‘empty’ is questionable, given that the future, as Benjamin’s angel reminds us, is already becoming occupied even before we enter it with the accumulating detritus of history’s violence, or, in a less catastrophic vein, at least the outcomes of present acts).

Edelman’s critical account of straight futurity focusses on those moments in culture, and in desire, that point to or involve the negation or derailment of the reproductive trajectory. While Edelman’s formulation of the problem is undoubtedly distinctive, it belongs to the broader gender- and queer-theoretical project of uncovering the agendas and mechanisms of reproductive futurism; of establishing what kinds of future are created within, and served by, the heteroreproductive matrix; and of pointing to alternative futures and alternative ways of relating to the future (including queer modes of non-relation) that are currently excluded by prevailing ‘sex-gender systems’ (to use the term coined by Gayle Rubin, 2000 [1975]: 106). Edelman both is and is not a ‘gender theorist’; while he concedes the masculinism of his own

queer-theoretical project, he has been criticised on this very score (see Lothian in this volume); one response to *No Future* takes the book to task for what it sees as a cursory and over-simplified account of psychoanalytic drive theory, a naïve validation of the death drive as somehow inherently opposed to “heteronormative power”, and an “embarrassingly pre-Foucaultian conception of sex” (Dean 2008: 137-8). The task here is not to participate in these criticisms of Edelman, but rather to sound out the possible resonances and dissonances between his refusal of reproductive futurism and the troubled relationships to reproduction and its negation that have been expressed in very different contexts, figured here by Weininger and Kertész but, it should go without saying, reducible to neither. Edelman’s is a queerness that deliberately refuses to endorse even a non-heteronormative discourse of reproductive politics, or reproductive ‘rights’ and ‘choices’. If gender theory, as I have argued elsewhere, can be understood as a mode of future-oriented inquiry underpinned by an often tacit utopianism (Ní Dhúill 2013), Edelman’s is a dystopian version thereof.

Yet dystopian refusalism is a vital interlocutor for any critical utopianism worthy of the name. Insofar as gender theory can be said to have a utopian dimension, its utopia is not one that would seek to cancel history and instate a new order in perpetuity, but rather a horizon (the image is Bloch’s) against which emancipatory and oppressive tendencies within the history of sex-gender systems can be more clearly identified, with a view to expanding the scope and effectiveness of emancipation in the present – whereby emancipation is understood not as a clearly describable, realisable goal but as a self-reflexive, self-revising tendency, a contested and contestable ground. The details of the various and often irreconcilable visions of emancipation that have been proposed in the course of gender theory’s recent history are to some extent beside the point: it should not be forgotten that even Weininger’s *Sex and Character* concludes with a call for the emancipation of woman, understood in a very distinctive sense as her emancipation from herself, her attainment to full humanity through the

living embodiment of the categorical imperative (Weininger 2005: 313). Whether a *fin de siècle* misogynist's vision for 'woman' could offer anything of use to the contemporary – and still urgent – project of exposing and contesting the continued oppressions (including self-oppressions) to which women remain subject is open to question, but a feminist lens can uncover some surprising moments within that misogyny, such as the following:

A man's attempt to find himself in a woman [...] necessarily presupposes a neglect of her empirical person. Such an attempt, therefore, is extremely *cruel* to the woman; and this is the root of the selfishness of all love as well as the selfishness of jealousy, which regards Woman as a completely dependent possession and does not consider her inner life at all.

This is where the parallel between the cruelty of eroticism and the cruelty of sexuality becomes complete. Love is murder. The sexual drive negates woman both as a physical and as a psychic being [...] The coarsest kind of sexuality sees Woman only as a device for masturbation or as a bearer of children (2005: 223-4).

Weininger's text, like so many documents of sex-gender history, may seem to a large extent 'unredeemable'; but, and for precisely this reason, it calls on the critical or feminist perspectives that revisit it to cultivate a Blochian mode of engagement with its 'unredeemed' content (*das Unabgegoltene*, sometimes translated as 'the uncompensated'; the association should be with redeeming in the sense of making good (a debt) or reclaiming (a pawned item), rather than with the religious sense of redemption *qua* salvation, although the latter clearly relates to the former in any case). The feminist reader cannot occupy the position of 'heir' to Weininger's legacy; but she can, perhaps, act as midwife to the disavowed meanings carried by his text. 'Reception' thus gives way to 'delivery', in a shift from the passive mode of receptivity – itself a linchpin of Weininger's searing characterisation of the feminine – to a

more active attitude that is prepared to get its hands dirty in the process of recuperating the *Unabgegoltene*s of the past. This process of active recuperation and activation of the past's 'unfinished business' is fundamental to the shaping of a habitable future, according to Bloch; his is a praxis-oriented conception of history that is highly relevant to critical theories of gender, insofar as the engaged analysis of what gender is and has been contributes to an ongoing expansion of the horizons within which sexed subjects can live through and against our genders towards a future that, while it cannot be fully dictated by us, should not be wholly dictated to us. The utopian desire underlying this critical project is in constant need of adjustment and corrective from dystopian or anti-utopian perspectives such as Edelman's, which alert us to the danger of living under the dictatorship of futures of various kinds.<sup>1</sup>

Returning to *No Future*, one effect of Edelman's anti-futurism is to trouble any consensus around what might constitute a future for gender worth hoping for. Insofar as he envisages a future at all, it is one entered backwards, Benjaminian angel-style, its gaze turned towards the wreckage of reproductive history. Its keyword could hardly be said to be hope (see Edelman 2004: 4). The refusal of the future *is* a negation of hope, and yet the energy of Edelman's polemic is unmistakable: far from promoting defeatism or any kind of quietist despair, it mobilises the pleasures of opacity and destructiveness to mount a critique of "the pervasive invocation of the Child as the emblem of futurity's unquestioned value" (2005: 3-4). By turning away from the notionally straight, intelligible line of reproductive futurism, Edelman draws attention to the possibility of forging alternative relationships to the future, ones that would not be monopolised by what he calls, in a particularly striking turn of phrase (the implications of which are discussed elsewhere in this volume at greater length by Alexis Lothian), "the fascism of the baby's face" (2005: 75). *No Future* would not be true to its own

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<sup>1</sup> On the differences between dystopia and anti-utopia, see Kumar (1987), Moylan (2000), Ní Dhúill (2010) and Adam Stock in this volume.



logic if it were to sketch a utopian future in which the violence of exclusion performed by the politics of reproductive futurism – “the only politics we’re permitted to know” (2004: 134) – would be overcome or undone. It is precisely by refusing the future on both counts – both as currently offered and figured by the Child, and as imaginable beyond that monopolising figure – that Edelman’s text throws us back onto the opaque, knotted, scarcely habitable present.

### **Impossible childhood**

Edelman refuses, provocatively, the “fascism of the baby’s face”; in the text to which we now turn, it is the historical experience of actual Fascism, and specifically of Nazi genocide, that consigns that face to nonexistence. This is where refusal begins to shade over into impossibility: where Edelman speaks from the position of a ‘we’ that abjures “fidelity to a future that’s always purchased at our expense” (2004: 4), Kertész’s *Kaddish for a Child Not Born* gives us a traumatised, futureless subjectivity whose relationship to any form of collectivity is profoundly troubled (the narrator’s Jewishness, for example, is figured as “*a bald woman in a red gown in front of a mirror*” (1997: 16, 17, 19, 69, to name just a few occasions of this obsessively repeated, almost always italicised phrase; the question of his Hungarianness is also raised as something improbable)). This is a subjectivity that can only address itself to the unlocatable, never realised face of the child it did not have. The text begins with the cry to which it periodically returns – “No!” – and ends where there is no future: here, it is not the ‘rectum’ of queer theory that is the grave (Bersani 1987), but rather the sewer of the genocidal past.

Under my feet the sewer lines roar as if the filthy flow of memories tried to break out of its hidden channels to sweep me away. Let it pass: I am prepared. In my last great effort

to pull myself together I have presented my frail and stubborn life – I have presented it  
so that with the baggage of this life in my raised hands I may go and in the dark stream  
of the fast-flowing black warmth

I may drown

Lord God

let me drown

forever,

Amen. (95)

The abject waste excreted from the human body after its reproduction through nutrition –  
“after all, one has to eat” (3) – becomes the figure for the destination of a life that has been  
violently ejected from the reproductive possibility of parenthood. The text in its entirety,  
including the repeated cry of ‘No’ that punctuates it, is addressed to a “you” – to the child not  
born, the child who remains in a cancelled future, a realm of unactualized potentiality. The  
narrator, driven initially “to view my existence in the context of your potentiality” (4, 11, 22),  
finally comes “to view your nonexistence in the context of the necessary and fundamental  
liquidation of my existence” (24, see also 55). Needless to say, this is no straightforward  
embrace of a ‘childfree lifestyle’, but rather a radical negation of reproductive desire, through  
and by the catastrophe of the Shoah. The “No!” which comes “immediately and forthwith,  
without hesitation and spontaneously” in response to the narrator’s wife’s declaration that  
“she wanted my child, yes, indeed” (68) cannot be characterised as a ‘decision’ or ‘choice’ (as  
the language of contemporary reproductive politics would have it). This “no” is

not a free decision in the sense of choosing between “yes” or “no”; no, this “no” was a  
recognition, a decision not made or makable by me but a decision made concerning me.

It wasn't even a decision: it was the recognition of my sentencing, and it was only a decision in the limited sense of not deciding against the decision (23-4).

The recognition concerns the narrator's coming to awareness of the impossibility of occupying the position of father: "'No' – I could never be another person's father, fate, god" (71). The father as the figure of rule, power, law, terror has become inextricably bound up with Auschwitz and is thus rendered an impossible location which the narrator can never occupy: "Auschwitz, I told her, appears to me in the image of a father" (88). Futurity, here in the guise of (paternal) generativity, has been foreclosed by the death camps.

Why is this so? Before its culmination in the "No" that consigns the "you" of the text to nonexistence, the negation of the future is already apparent in what the narrator calls his "rental life", the untenability of his day-to-day existence in a high-rise prefabricated rental apartment in Budapest, surrounded by objects with which he is unable to form any kind of meaningful connection, and occupying a provisional, suspended temporality: "all I had to do was to pass the time between my two true occupations: the time of my birth and that of my demise" (43). It is Auschwitz that has destroyed the narrator's ability to project a future under any sign other than that of imminent catastrophe. The play of tenses and variation in the repeated phrase "the Germans might/may/may indeed return at any time" express the unlivability of a temporal location in which the cultivation of a relationship or commitment to the future has become unthinkable:

I lived, admittedly, but I lived in such a way that *the Germans might return at any time*; thus I didn't quite live. [...] I was [...] unencumbered [...] by the burden of life itself: albeit I live in a way that the Germans may return at any time. [...] it is a fact that, theoretically speaking, the Germans may indeed return at any time: *der Tod ist ein*

*Meister aus Deutschland* [...] he may come at any time. [...] Thus, I lived my rental life in such a way that I didn't quite live (45).

In the absence of reproduction and paternity, literary productivity might have offered the narrator another line to the future, but in fact his writing, too, becomes engulfed in the sewer of Auschwitz memories, from which “one can never recover” (60). The mistake of the ill-fated marriage to “my then future, now former wife” – a turn of phrase which in itself underscores the closing down of the future that so preoccupies the text – is its attempt to invest in the future in the form of the narrator's literary work, which the couple try to figure as a child (“We raised this plan together, cuddled, spoiled it like a baby”, 65). The future is thus doubly negated: just as the position of the father has become impossible to inhabit, so too does the activity of writing, far from breaking the grip of the death camps, remain firmly within their grasp, as attested by the recurring image borrowed from Paul Celan's *Death Fugue*, that of “the grave dug in the air”. The narrator's pen becomes the spade with which he is bound to continue the work of liquidation begun at Auschwitz, the digging of his own grave: “How could I have explained to my wife that my pen was my spade? That my only reason for writing was that I had to, and I had to because even then they whistled to me to dig deeper?” (66). His writing cannot issue in “some sort of literary or other future” (66); the fate (a word that carries a heavy burden both here and elsewhere in Kertész's work, particularly in the first volume of the tetralogy, *Fateless*, also translated as *Fatelessness*) of the death camp survivor is to “dig my grave into the clouds, the wind, into nothing”, and the spade used for this task cannot simultaneously be used to perform work predicated on, or productive of, any kind of future. If the marriage founders on its error of figuring the literary work as a child, this is because the futurity vested in the literary work is in fact a destroyed futurity, a future of destruction: “My work saved me”, the narrator concedes, “albeit it saved me for the sake of destruction” (Kertész 1997: 93). *Kaddish for a Child Not Born* renounces the possibility that

the renunciation of human generativity in the form of the child might be generative in other ways.

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing discussion has aimed to highlight the multiplicity of possible meanings that can inhere in refusals of the child; to suggest that such refusals express a range of thinkable relationships to the future, including, but not inevitably entailing, the attempted negation of any relationship to the future whatsoever; and to underscore the importance of contextualising non-reproduction within the historical situation to which it may represent a response. “After all, children were born even in Auschwitz”, says Kertész’s narrator (1997: 69); but this denial of the denial of life (to paraphrase the sentence that immediately precedes the one just quoted), while it opens the possibility of some kind of affirmation that could counterbalance the text’s persistent “No!”, remains the road not taken, at least by the narrator, if not his wife (1997: 94). As the child is the bearer of the future, the future may, in turn, be figured as a child; what Weininger, Edelman, and Kertész confront in different ways is the possibility that this child might also bind us to a past we would prefer to overcome.

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